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ABSTRACT

The example of the Tuloso-Midway Independent School District of Corpus Christi, Texas, points out the community support benefits to be gained from an effective public relations policy. Such policies should be develped before a crisis destroys opportunities for widespread support. The system should assess its current communications needs first, then review the system's ability to provide the necessary time and resources. Drawing on this information, the board can then draft an appropriate policy. The policy document should include a statement covering the reasons for establishing a policy, designation of those responsible, provisions for regular development of public relations plans based on current conditions, and a method for regular evaluation. In addition to discussing policy needs and policy development, this article reviews significant reasons for making public communication a priority, suggests several kinds of publications that districts can produce, lists strategies for involving the community, identifies additional sources of information about public relations, and emphasizes the importance of maintaining good relations with the local media. (PGD)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 17/Number 3/March 1986

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✓ Public information programs are good policy

by Joan L. Curcio
and Edna M. Manning

The pressure of budget constraints and the need to be fiscally accountable for public school funds can result in neglect of your public information program. But a public information program is not a frill—nice to have but easily expendable. Instead, it is so important that it should be a systemwide priority. "Catching as catch can" where communicating with the school community and general public are concerned can put a school system way behind in its efforts to win and sustain support.

Some school systems, particularly small and rural systems, lose out by assuming that a limited central office staff—or no staff at all—and no expertise in communications shuts the door on establishing a public information program. But there are ways.

You begin with a commitment and a plan.

Jack Kinder, in the Phi Delta Kappa fastback *School Public Relations: Communicating to the Community* (1982), wrote that "Public Relations, a subject that to some carries negative connotations, belongs at the heart of every school system, for the schools that will remain viable in the years ahead are those that are able to communicate, clearly and compellingly, with their patrons."

Every school system has to "remain viable" if it is to do its job. When a school board acknowledges this as a real and valid need, it is ready to make a commitment to a communications plan.

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One school system's story

The Tuloso-Midway (Corpus Christi, Texas) school board made such a commitment in response to a recognized need for improved harmony and trust in the school community. Divisiveness in the community about how the schools were run had grown to unmanageable proportions. The media had a field day reporting school news based on incomplete, biased, and otherwise inaccurate information.

In 1981, following a particularly difficult period for the 2,700-student K-12 school system, the board formed a committee to address public relations. The committee's defined purpose was "to explore ways that the school district can improve communications with the patrons of the district and to suggest a plan of action to the board."

With the assistance of a communications expert from another Texas school system, the committee outlined the components of a local public relations program. The committee also acknowledged that the school system had not been doing an adequate job of communicating its achievements to the public.

In response the board adopted a policy committing the school system to a public relations program built around two-way communications. It also provided budgetary support for a new position: a public information officer. The position was filled, and a newsletter, which is mailed to all taxpayers, was initiated.

Tuloso-Midway also formed an Industry-Education Council composed of representatives of local industry and business. The council meets regularly with the superintendent and her staff to share information; members also participate in adopt-a-school programs.

Direct and indirect results

In 1984, the Tuloso-Midway school board was chosen as one of four top honor boards in Texas by the state school boards association. Among the criteria for the selection was the harmony in which the board worked.

The newsletter, which has grown in some instances to eight pages, was recognized by the state public relations association as a "Best in Show." A special edition of the newsletter featuring systemwide examples of student writing and graphics gained national recognition. School systems nationwide and as far away as Japan continue to request sample copies.

Not all of Tuloso-Midway's successes can be attributed to its communications program, but it has played a significant part in reducing discord and enhancing public involvement in the schools. Board member Ernest Hunt, who has served on the board throughout this period, says, "We placed a priority on strengthening communications with the community and it proved a wise move. It has paid dividends for the students, the board, and the community."

Make an assessment

Don't wait until your relations with the community hit crisis proportions before addressing your public information needs. It's a lot easier to build on a firm foundation of community support than on the debris of disharmony.

Begin (or renew) your system's communications plan by assessing the

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needs. Try to find out where there are gaps, such as:

- Are there controversial issues in the school community that information can diffuse or diminish?
- What needs can be met or assisted through information?
- What does your school community need to know?
- Are there current educational issues or trends that your school system should communicate to its community?
- What needs support? From whom?
- Does the community have a clear understanding of the school system mission, goals, and objectives, as well as the process by which goals and objectives are determined?

A community survey is a useful instrument for finding the answers to these questions. As the survey is constructed, be sure there is a vehicle for finding out *to whom* the answers belong. Ask if they are parent taxpayers, nonparent taxpayers, parents with children no longer in public schools, and so on. This information will help you determine who needs what information and through which media your school community best "receives" its information.

School system resources

In addition to determining who needs what information, you also should assess the school system's ability to support a suitable program of public information and communications and recognize such a program as a board priority. Decide what resources are available now and what might or should become available in the future.

Are your commitment and resources strong enough to create a position or redesign a job to include a public information officer? (Can the time board members and staff spend with the media and other aspects of public information be channeled to one person for efficiency and effectiveness? You bet it can.) If not, can you afford one teaching hour from an English, journalism, family living, or other interested staff member's schedule to assume these duties? What resources do you have if you dig deeply? Who can help you to support this venture financially? The PTA? Local businesses? Big businesses? A public or private grant?

Gather your resources and start outlining a policy.

Drafting the policy

The board will make the final determination of the shape and content of the communications plan policy. In drafting the statement, however, consider including an introductory statement of belief that explains why a communications plan is a school board priority—the reasons for providing the program. Including the rationale in policy will encourage and enable future boards to evaluate the continuing validity of the plan before deciding to make revisions or pulling out of the communications business completely.

Aside from designating who will be responsible for implementing the plan, particulars of the plan probably should not be included in policy. The wisest course is to call for an annual plan to be presented by the superintendent to the board as part of the budget process. Policy drafted in this way enables the school system to add to its communications activities each year, to react to evaluation results, to incorporate new techniques and resources, or to pull back selectively at critical times.

Be sure to include in the policy provision for an annual evaluation of the plan or its significant components. When in doubt, ask your community. The Tuloso-Midway school system did just that when a board member received complaints about the need for and expense of the school system's newsletter. She asked that a community survey be taken. A postage-paid postcard bearing survey questions about the usefulness of the newsletter and whether or not the family wished to continue receiving it was sent with a copy of the newsletter to school parents and other citizens. The response was strongly in favor of continuing the newsletter.

Is communications a priority?

By now you may be thinking that while a communications program is desirable, your school system has more pressing needs. You don't have the time, money, resources, or even the inclination, you think, to set up a communications program.

Hold on a moment. Isn't it important to spend school system time and money to increase public support? Don't you want:

- school activities to be seen in a positive light so that all facets of the community will view its schools with pride and become ambassadors for the school system;
- the public to undertand and believe in your philosophy, and the mission, goals, and objectives that the board in conjunction with the administration has set for the children's education;
- the trust of school parents and the community in general that you are carrying out your charge;
- local government officials to view the system with pride in order to obtain any benefits available to students;
- interest aroused in possible future programs so the school system can be on the cutting edge of educational ventures, putting your students ahead of the pack;
- collaboration, assistance, mutual respect, and cooperation from the businesses and industries in your community;
- misunderstandings clarified;
- the school system's reputation to be enhanced so that the opportunities for youngsters are increased;
- real estate agencies to use the schools to attract parents to the community, thus enhancing student enrollments;
- quality teachers to be attracted to your school system so that students receive a quality education?

A communications plan will not substitute for a committed board and staff; a curriculum of strength, breadth, and vision; quality teachers; informed admin-

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istrators; appropriate and vital programs; state-of-the-art facilities; an appropriate learning environment; top-notch interpersonal relationships; sound fiscal policies; or motivated students. But if you are doing these things well already, or striving toward achieving them, won't you be further ahead if everyone knows about them and supports them—or says directly why they don't?

Some things to do

Let's be practical and look at what your plan might include given your resources. You can start by forming an advisory council to include business, parent, and other community representatives. The council can advise on the information needs of the community by determining where public information resources are placed now and what the best strategies for communicating your message and encouraging two-way communication will be.

What else can you do? Consider publications, such as:

- a school system calendar that includes the year's school events;
- a "facts and figures" brochure for real estate offices, banks, prospective parents, job applicants, the media;
- a handbook of critical school system policies and procedures in layman's terms for parents and other citizens;
- a school system newsletter;
- a staff newsletter, particularly one that recognizes staff achievements;
- an annual report to the community;
- a brochure describing school programs and their objectives;
- parenting information with tips on assisting children with schoolwork and how to communicate with the school;
- a brochure introducing board members with information on the procedure for providing community input at board meetings, executive sessions, the board's code of ethics, etc.;
- an orientation packet for new students.

Also look for strategies that will involve the community directly, such as:

- public hearings on such critical issues as the system's five-year plan or proposed annual budget;
- parent coffees in various parts of the community (parent organizations can sponsor these, with administrators and program leaders invited to discuss school programs) structured to provide information and offset or prevent rumors;
- a vehicle for meeting with local business and industry representatives regularly, establishing contact with company personnel directors and realtors, establishing an adopt-a-school program through the local Chamber of Commerce;
- regular contact with local civic organizations;
- an invitation to the city mayor or county chairman and other government officials to visit the schools and participate in programs;
- a videotape about instructional programs for viewing throughout the community;
- a slide-tape show to orient new parents and students;
- activities in the schools for community members of all ages;
- a process for congratulating parents of newborns to inform them about the school system;
- guest appearances on local talk shows;
- forums and seminars for local citizens on education issues.

Don't be overwhelmed by the array of possibilities. Just take one idea and get started. And this list is in no way exhaustive. Expert advice and numerous resources for expanding on these ideas and giving confidence to the neophyte in public information are available.

Help is available

Take the time to become acquainted with the many resource packets with "how to do it" sections available from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). NSPRA offers a *Basic School PR Kit*, a comprehensive list of public information materials, as well as an annual national conference. Also inquire about public relations assistance that may be available from your state school boards association, the National School Boards Association (NSBA), and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) that can help sharpen skills and build expertise.

The media connection

Your efforts can be sabotaged overnight if you don't develop a positive relationship with the local media. Be cooperative, respond to requests for information promptly and completely, and respect the efforts of reporters to do their jobs.

The best approach is to identify a staff member who will be responsible for dealing with the media on a regular basis to avoid confusion, build trust, and provide consistent information. Also, invite the press to systemwide and local school activities. Get to know the individuals behind the bylines.

Most important: Compliment reporters when they write a positive story, give credit to the school system for its efforts, handle a complex or controversial issue sensitively, or give fair treatment to school issues. Put it in writing; send a copy to the reporter's editor.

Everybody's business

Including a plan of communications with the community as part of school system policy will make communications the business of every school employee. The result: a bridge between the schools and community that will grow stronger over time.

Jack Kinder says that "doing a good job and then telling the school story... is the business of every employee." The story is more likely to be told if you *plan* to tell it. ■

One policy isn't enough

Adopting a policy statement about your public information/communications program can go a long way in building and sustaining community support. But other policy areas relate to the subject and should be reviewed as you assess your comprehensive community relations program. Some policy areas you should review are:

- media relations;
- community involvement in decision making;
- public participation at board meetings;
- individual and collective roles of board members in communicating with the public;
- advisory committees;
- guidelines for school system publications;
- visitors to the schools;
- community use of school facilities;
- relations with community organizations;
- relations with governmental authorities.